The Lithic Muse: Inscribed Greek Poetry in the Classroom

Except for the rare touch of color or variation, inscribed Greek verse does not play a role in most undergraduate Greek, Classics, or Ancient History courses, especially at the lower level. I present here several ways epigrams and other poetic inscriptions can be integrated into these classes.

In Greek history courses, epigrams can illustrate the contingency of history, how "facts" are constructed and events are viewed differently through different eyes. Course texts or sourcebooks might contain a translation of the two triumphalizing elegiac couplets inscribed on the base of the chariot and team dedicated by the Athenians to celebrate their triumph over Boiotians and Chalkidians in 506 BCE (*CEG* 179, Fornara no. 42); but a recent find from Thebes invites more reflection (*SEG* 56.521): a fragmentary epigram from a dedication for the same war, one that highlights Theban successes unreported by Herodotus (5.77). Such public epigrams open an interesting lens, one we can link to hexametric and elegiac poetry and often to the production of sculpture standing on the inscribed bases, into the creation of cultural memory, or *lieux de mémoire.* Consider the Battle of Marathon: epigrams on the city cenotaph (*IG* I^3 503/504, part at Fornara no. 51) and the Erechtheid tribal casualty list (*SEG* 56.430) not only bring new material into the classroom, they astound with the sheer quantity of inscribed verse—originally 20 couplets at Marathon and at least 16 in the city, the most extensive surviving Athenian poems (or collections of four-liners?) between Solon and Aeschylus.

Private verse inscriptions provide teachable moments on many aspects of Greek culture. Among the earliest, "Nestor's cup" invites exploration of eighth-century sympotic behavior, gift-giving, and homoeroticism (*CEG* 454). Phrasikleia illustrates archaic elite display and gender roles: a *kore* on a base with an elegiac epitaph (*CEG* 24) describing her death before marriage with echoes of the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (28f.). Epigrams on athletes' dedications prompt exploration of parallels with Pindar (*Olympian* 12 and *CEG* 393 for Ergoteles), victor statues (*CEG* 397 with the Delphi charioteer), the topography of sanctuaries (many seen by Pausanias), and heroization (*CEG* 399 for Euthymos).

Epigram also supplies opportunities for Greek language instruction. In translation courses, I always place a photo and a Greek text beside the translation in Powerpoints: a bit of play with the alphabet (and its early varieties) and some pointing out of words and phrases capture students' attention, and may inspire them to take Greek. In elementary Greek, epigram offers that touch of color mentioned above, including the introduction of cultural material and physical *Realien*; but epigrams can also illustrate grammatical points, dialectical and paleographic variability, and linguistic change over time, and all this in texts so brief beginning students can get through them. Upper level Greek offers many opportunities for the study of inscribed verse. Epigrams accompanying casualty lists are a perfect match for Pericles' funeral oration; and in a course on drama and religion, my students read the Palaikastro hymn and compared it to literary hymns (using Furley and Bremer 2001).

Bibliography

CEG	P. A. Hansen, *Carmina Epigraphica Graeca* (2 vols.). Berlin 1983, 1989.
Fornara	C. W. Fornara, *Archaic Times to the End of the Peloponnesian War.*[2] Cambridge 1983.
Furley and Bremer	W. D. Furley and J. M. Bremer, *Greek Hymns* (2 vols.). Tübingen 2001.
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae*
SEG	*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*